

Iran 'main security challenge' in ME

Says France's Macron

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said Iran was the main strategic and security challenge in the Middle East, citing the acceleration of its nuclear programme and support for Russia's war against Ukraine.

"Iran is the main strategic and security challenge for France, the Europeans, the entire region and beyond," Macron said in a speech to ambassadors, adding the issue would be a key subject of discussion with the new administration of US president-elect Donald Trump.

"The acceleration of the nuclear programme leads us nearly to the point of no return," Macron said.



Iran says it is enriching uranium for peaceful purposes and has stepped up the programme since US President-elect Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the 2015 deal during his first term of office and restored tough US sanctions on Tehran.

European powers France, Germany and Britain said last month Iran's actions had further hollowed out the deal and would heighten its stockpile of high-enriched uranium without a "credible civilian justification".

The head of the UN nuclear watchdog said in December that the Islamic Republic was "dramatically" accelerating enrichment close to the roughly 90 percent level that is bomb-grade.

The three European powers were co-signatories to the 2015 deal in which Iran agreed to curb enrichment, seen by the West as a disguised effort to develop nuclear-weapons capability, in return for a lifting of international sanctions.

French, German and British diplomats are set to hold a follow-up meeting with Iranian counterparts on January 13 after one last month held to discuss the possibility of serious negotiations in coming months to defuse tensions with Tehran with Trump due to return to the White House on January 20.

CORRUPTION CASES Jailed Malaysia ex-PM Najib moves closer to house arrest

AFP, Putrajaya

Jailed former Malaysian leader Najib Razak yesterday moved closer to serving the rest of his sentence at home after an appeal court ruled he could use a royal decree supporting his claim.

Najib, 71, is serving a six-year jail term for corruption related to the plunder of sovereign wealth fund 1MDB and faces several other cases linked to the financial scandal that led to his defeat in the 2018 elections.

The purported existence of an order by the former king granting him permission to serve the rest of his current sentence at home has been at the centre of his arguments before the Court of Appeal.

A three-member bench ruled 2-1 to grant Najib's appeal to use the decree to argue his case before the High Court.

"Given the fact that there is no challenge (of the existence of the decree), there is no justification that the order has not been complied with," said Mohamad Firuz Jaffril, one of the three Court of Appeal judges.

The High Court ruled last year that affidavits supporting Najib's claim about the document's existence were inadmissible as evidence because they were hearsay, prompting the former premier to challenge the decision.

But new evidence submitted by Najib's lawyers showed that "the issue of hearsay can no longer stand," Firuz said. "We are therefore minded to allow the appeal," he added.

Yesterday's ruling means that the case will go back to the High Court, where the decree could be introduced as evidence to bolster Najib's bid to be placed under house arrest.



Pro-Yoon protesters attend a rally in support of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol near his official residence, in Seoul, South Korea yesterday. Impeached Yeol appeared set to evade arrest ahead of a last night deadline after anti-graft investigators asked for more time to enforce a warrant.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Fighting rages inside Russia's Kursk region

Moscow reports gains in Ukraine; Kyiv denies fall of Kurakhove

REUTERS

Russia said yesterday its forces had made important gains in eastern Ukraine while continuing to fend off a new Ukrainian offensive inside the Kursk region of western Russia, where a second day of fierce fighting was under way.

The Russian defence ministry said its forces had captured the town of Kurakhove, 32 km (20 miles) south of Pokrovsk, a Ukrainian logistics hub towards which Russian forces have been advancing for months.

The ministry said taking Kurakhove, which had held out for many weeks, would enable Moscow's forces to step up the pace of their advance in Ukraine's Donetsk region. It also said it had captured Dachenske, a settlement within five miles of Pokrovsk.

Ukrainian monitoring group DeepState, which tracks the front line using open sources, showed most of Kurakhove under Russian control. Ukraine's Khortytsia group of forces said Russian forces continued to attack Kurakhove but Ukrainian forces were working to identify and repel Russian assault groups on that part of the front.

Both sides are fighting to improve their battlefield positions before US President-elect Donald Trump, who has pledged to bring a quick end to the nearly three-year



old war, takes office on January 20.

Ukraine's main achievement in the past five months of fighting has been to capture and hold on to a slice of territory inside Russia's Kursk region that could provide it with an important bargaining chip in possible peace talks.

Ukraine has not revealed details of the new offensive it launched in Kursk on Sunday, though a senior Ukrainian official has said Russia is "getting what it deserves".

Russian accounts said Moscow's forces had beaten back the initial Ukrainian assaults but further waves were expected.

"Of course, this is not the end. Now we are recording a concentration of enemy equipment in another direction and naturally we understand that

he (Ukraine) will try to strike in this direction. Right now I won't say where," said Major General Apti Alaudinov, commander of a Chechen unit fighting for Russia in Kursk.

Ukrainian and Western assessments suggest about 11,000 troops from Russian ally North Korea have been deployed in the Kursk region to support Moscow's forces. Russia has neither confirmed nor denied their presence.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday more than 1,000 North Korean troops had been killed or wounded. Reacting to the new Ukrainian offensive, the United States, Britain and the European Union have reaffirmed their support for Kyiv.

MAOIST ATTACK 8 Indian cops, driver killed in bomb blast

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

At least eight policemen and a driver were killed in a bomb blast set off by Maoist rebels in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, police said yesterday.

The police vehicle in which the victims were travelling was hit by a blast in the Bijapur district of the state yesterday, a police statement said.

This is the latest in a series of sporadic attacks on security forces in the state. It follows frequent gun battles between the forces and the rebels in which several rebels have been killed in recent months.

Chhattisgarh and its neighbouring states in central and eastern India have been affected by a decades-long insurgency by Maoist rebels.

The rebels subscribe to a form of communism propagated by late Chinese leader Mao Zedong, and have waged a guerrilla-style offensive against the government. Maoists say they are fighting to give poor Indian farmers and landless labourers more control over their land and a greater claim to its minerals currently exploited by major mining companies.

Cyberattacks on Taiwan gov't double in 2024

AFP, Taipei

Chinese hackers were involved in most of the cyberattacks against Taiwan last year, which doubled to a daily average of 2.4 million, Taiwanese security officials said.

China regards Taiwan as part of its territory and for years has been ramping up military, diplomatic and political pressure on the island to accept its claims of sovereignty.

Taiwan says cyberattacks have also increased as Beijing uses a range of "greyzone" methods to harass the island – tactics that fall short of an act of war.

Most of the daily attacks received by Taiwan's Government Service Network were attributed to China's "cyber force", the National Security Bureau said in a report on Sunday.

Defence, telecommunications and transport were among the top targets, with many of the cyberattacks "effectively detected and blocked", it said.

"The growing numbers of attacks pinpoint the increasingly severe nature of China's hacking activities," the report said.

"Its techniques have become increasingly sophisticated and covered a wide range of targets, such as government agencies, critical infrastructure and high tech manufacturing industry."

Chinese hackers carried out Distributed Denial of Service attacks on Taiwan's transport and financial sectors when Beijing held military drills near the island, "intending to intensify the harassment effect and military intimidation", the bureau said.

FLOODED COAL MINE Around 18 Indian labourers feared trapped in Assam

NDTV ONLINE

Around 18 Indian labourers are feared trapped after water entered a "rat hole" mine in Assam yesterday. The 300-foot deep coal mine is located in Umrao, a remote industrial town in Dima Hasao district.

Water has reached about 100 feet of the illegal quarry, sources said. Police and rescue teams have reached the spot and using two motor pumps to pump out the water.

Teams of the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) have left for the area that is close to the Meghalaya border.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has said the state has requested the Army's assistance in the ongoing rescue operation.



"Rat hole" mining is a hazardous technique where narrow tunnels are manually dug by workers. These tunnels lead to deep pits from which coal is mined. They also harm the environment because the acidic water and heavy metals discharged from the mines are toxic to water sources used for agriculture and human consumption.

In 2018, 15 miners were trapped in an illegal coal mine in the East Jaintia Hills district in Meghalaya after water from a nearby river gushed into it. Only two bodies were the National Disaster Response Force had seen, the then commandant, SK Sastri, had said.

In 2019, Meghalaya was fined Rs 100 crore by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for failing to curb illegal coal mining in the state. The NGT had found that most of the 24,000 mines in the state were illegal.



Relatives of Ukrainian Marines, who defended the Azovstal and are currently prisoners of war, hold banners as they attend a rally calling for the return of service members from Russian captivity, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Kyiv, Ukraine yesterday.

WAR-TORN SUDAN Over 30m in need of aid: UN

AFP, Port Sudan

More than 30 million people, over half of them children, are in need of aid in Sudan after twenty months of war, the United Nations said yesterday.

The UN has launched a \$4.2 billion call for funds, targeting 20.9 million people across Sudan from a total of 30.4 million people it said are in need in what it called "an unprecedented humanitarian crisis".

Sudan has been torn apart and pushed to the brink of famine by the war that erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary RSF.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed and more than eight million internally displaced, which, in addition to 2.7 million displaced before the war, has made Sudan the world's largest internal displacement crisis.